



Mafalda Mondestin's Secret Tropical Garden: Looking at the Island from the Dominican Republic

Carine Schermann

PhD Candidate, Francophone and Caribbean Studies
Florida State University

Abstract

In her ground-breaking *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (2022), Régine Michelle Jean-Charles examines the work of the Haitian-born artist Mafalda Mondestin. For the series of paintings titled *When the Island Keeps All the Secrets* (2015), Jean-Charles writes: "The idea conveyed by the title of Mondestin's series, that the land holds secrets it does not disclose, is significant in that it positions the environment as an element that carries the weight of history. An environmental witness to history, the land holds secrets, trauma, violence, and so much more" (239). Compelled by this idea that the land carries its secrets in plain sight, Carine Schermann engages with Mafalda Mondestin in the garden of her new home, in Buena Vista, in the central mountains of the Dominican Republic. After a decade spent in Haiti, Mondestin moved to the eastern part of the island. This interview, conducted in October 2023, reveals insights on migration, history, COVID, the environment, and communal spaces that exist for women, or that can be (re)imagined across the island. Schermann and Mondestin speak about the visual modes of Black women's portrayal in Mondestin's aesthetics, allowing the viewer to overcome preconceptions of gender, sexuality, and representation.

Keywords: Tropicality, womanhood, Blackness, Haiti, Dominican Republic

Acknowledgement: My sincere thanks go to Mafalda Mondestin for the time we spent together in the beautiful garden of her mountain home in the Dominican Republic, and for welcoming me and my sister into her art studio.

Images reproduced with permission.

How to cite

Schermann, Carine. 2025. "Mafalda Mondestin's Secret Tropical Garden: Looking at the Island from the Dominican Republic." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (16): 311-328.

Carine Schermann: We are now in the garden of your home in Buena Vista, in the central mountains of the Dominican Republic. Can you tell me a little bit about this new environment?

Mafalda Mondestin: I moved here, especially in this area, because of something basic, which is weather. It has a similar elevation to La Boule¹, and it is not too far from the main cities. So even if I need to do certain things, go to events, visit people, it's a quick drive. But here it feels like I'm in nature. I haven't really visited the area yet, but it's been lovely to be here.

CS: Moving away from your homeland is complex, personal and layered, especially in this moment when Haiti is bleeding its youth, and artists – all people– are trying to find better ways to live and deal with the terror of the *quotidien*. So, I wanted to know what would you be willing to share about your own migration, the choice, or the opportunity of the Dominican Republic, and how it has impacted your life and work?

MM: To say “complex” would be an understatement. I always thought I was the kind of person who would stay in Haiti despite all the issues going on. But I don't know if it was fair to me to continue being in that environment the way it was. I do have U.S. citizenship, so logically, it would make more sense for me to go back to the U.S., right? Initially, moving back to Haiti was a very conscious decision to go back or return to what is known as the “third world.” I preferred evolving in spaces, you know, that were not former or current imperial powers. I wanted to try and build in the place where I came from.

So, moving here recently was really a question of proximity as well – being close to Haiti. There is something cathartic about still being on the same island. Even

though, I'm not going to lie, historically we know the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic has been fraught.

Another thing I thought about [is that] I actually never visited the Dominican Republic until I moved here. It was never a conscious decision, because my parents were very political. We were very aware of where we stand, who we are. And even though I never really got a chance to learn about the Dominican Republic fully – and I would say that this is a fault of mine simply because I knew there was a fraught relationship, and maybe that is unfair on my part because it is a neighbouring island – we share a history, we are inextricably tied. So, I am processing living here. I do feel a certain guilt at times, being here. There is also the guilt of leaving people behind, of others not being able to find the opportunity to leave Haiti. I think about all those things.

It is interesting being here. I am learning to know the Dominicans, that everything is not black or white. There are wonderful people here, people who believe in fraternity with Haitian people; people who fight against anti-Haitian propaganda. I think it is an opportunity for me to be more open-minded. Since I've been here, I've never had one bad experience. Everybody is super kind; people even go out of their way to help you sometimes. So, excuse my French, but sometimes it is a real “mind-fuck” because I'm still navigating what I knew of the Dominican Republic, that “they don't like us.” But as I said, it's not black or white, the whole island, its particular government, and certain groups of people. I have to say that the whole canal issue is not helping.² I consume Dominican media, as well as Haitian news, and I see firsthand how one story can be told completely differently, and I think that's unfortunate.

CS: Talking about the canal, have you had encounters with people who were particularly inspiring, or have you heard stories since you've been here, of activism and the fight against racism?

MM: I haven't been to any particular event, but I watch from afar. My Spanish is horrible. I feel like I am the only one in my family who didn't learn Spanish fully in school, because I think there was a point in time where it was either Spanish or Latin. I don't know what possessed me to choose Latin, which is a dead language [laughter]. So, because of my lack of Spanish, there are certain things that I don't do unless I am accompanied by somebody who can translate for me. I can read Spanish, I understand most of it, I can say things, but when something is said back to me, I am lost.

I finally understand my mother, who lived in the US since she was 17 and had to speak English. But you know she is Haitian; she has an accent. My mum has better vocabulary than the average American. But because of her accent, she feels self-conscious. So now I understand a little bit of this fear of expressing oneself in a foreign language. I follow things from afar; I follow people from afar. I've met a few artists here, some in person, some through correspondence.

CS: Three years ago, you were in a residence in La Habana, Cuba, also a Hispanophone island, very close to Haiti. How do you relate your experience here to the past one you had in Cuba?

MM: I feel like they are different places, both in the Caribbean. I feel more of an affinity with Cuban culture, maybe because I know it better. When I went to Cuba, everybody was so curious. It's a communist country, but people are very aware of Haitian culture and of what's going on in the world. When I went there, the place I stayed at didn't have internet. I didn't stay in a hotel but in a *casa particular*. There was a park nearby, you buy an ETECSA card, gain access to internet, and people were very curious, like: "Where are you from? Oh, from Haiti!" In that sense, it was a very different experience.

CS: In your art, the natural environment is very present. So, to start approaching your work with a broad question: what are your main inspirations?

MM: I don't want to sound corny [laughter] but, yes, nature is one of my main inspirations. I am easily distracted. But when I sit outside, it allows my brain to explore, expand, and to connect the dots with the things that I love. It helps me keep a clear mind about my creative process. I also admire many artists, many Caribbean artists. Films are inspiring. I've always thought that the filmmaking process is fascinating. Inspiration comes from everything, basically [laughter]. Nature is very present in the work; it is a character in the work. I use it as a background; sometimes it has a more important role. But the work is not necessarily about the environment or environmentalism.

When I started to do nudes, it was after coming back to Haiti after living in the U.S. for a while – having never lived as an adult in Haiti, living a sheltered life, with parents taking you to school, then living in the U.S. and Canada for a while and entering the workforce in those environments, and then coming to Haiti where things were different. Haiti was an interesting place to me, where *machismo* is very present, but at the same time, it is a space where I have found that women are assertive. There's violence against women in Haiti, clearly, I am not going to deny that, but I found that women were able to move or have an autonomy that is different than it is in the U.S. or Canada where perhaps the feminist movement was more visible, where there were laws enacted for civil rights, for women to gain same access to power, to opportunities. There's an assertiveness that I have only found in Haiti. I also feel like there's still this trope in Haiti where the women are “poto mitan.”³ I get it, but can't we just be ourselves? Can't we just be free?

I think that is part of self-preservation: to not want to carry the burden of society all the time. So, I would paint these women in nature, unburdened by society's demands. It could seem very decorative *de prime abord*, but it's not really. We don't have to carry the burden all the time; we already know our strength and all that we do in the community, but sometimes y'all need to leave us alone!

[laughter]. And I felt like nature was a safe space for that to happen in the work, because historically, women have been, not just in Haiti but across the world, the ones who know nature. I think about Boston, about the witch hunts, and all the women who were killed. These were women who knew plants, medicine, who were healers. Women knew these things.

CS: Also, women have been historically the caregivers in the family, which is also implied in the notion of “poto mitan.”

MM: Women are the preservers of culture in that sense, as well. I often think about certain things like industrialization, dictatorship, and brain drain in Haiti. Sometimes, I feel detached from a lot of things that should be mine, culturally. For example, I think about the things my grandmother knew about plants. There was a young woman working for her who got burnt with boiling water that was thrown in her face. It was in the 1960s, I believe. They took her to the hospital, bandaged her whole face and brought her back home. My grandmother took everything off, made concoctions with different plants, and put it on her face consistently for days. And her skin was restored to its natural state. There are certain things that were not passed down to me, and I feel very unfortunate that I don't have this knowledge. So, in that sense, I keep referencing nature when I think about my grandmother, my great-grandmother. One of my great-grandmothers finished school in CM2.⁴ That was her highest education, but nonetheless, she was a businesswoman. She married. When her husband died, she did not remarry because, in Haiti at the time, everything a woman possessed belonged to her husband. She worked hard, raised her kids, and owned three houses; she would buy her clothes or had them made from Paris. This is a woman who was independent, who was her own person. It's things like that I think about in my work, even if it's not evoked in a very literal way. And nature is always part of it because “*medam yo konn fey*,”⁵ we use plants for everything, we ate everything my great-grandmother planted. I don't have a green thumb [laughter]. My mum does. In the past year in La Boule, she planted tomatoes, *mayi*, and all those things. I was like: “*Mami*, why don't I know these

things? Why aren't all these things passed down through your blood?" I'm just very jealous [laughter].

CS: This whole story with your grandmother and your great-grandmother really resonates with me because my mum is from Congo and my grandmother was a healer, *une guérisseuse*, in Pointe-Noire. A local but almost famous person because people would go to her to find a solution through plants and healing practices. It's interesting to see that across the Atlantic, those knowledges and practices that are, perhaps, being lost on our generation.

MM: I think it's very unfortunate, but I don't think all is lost. There's a lot of people doing work, like Marie-Lise Neptune,⁶ who was my neighbour in Haiti. So, the knowledge is not lost. But I lost it [laughter]. I think that one interesting thing about Haiti, and when I see differences between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, is that it is often said that Haiti is probably the closest thing to Africa in the Caribbean region, which makes sense. The Haiti Revolution happened in 1804, and by that time, there was a lot of preservation of knowledge from Africa, through the *Marrons*.⁷ Some things were brought over, but I think they were able to find new or equivalent things on the island, as well. I remember when COVID happened, I saw an article on BBC or some other network, basically saying: "Well, we are waiting for the Haitians to die." They believed the places that were going to be the most impacted by COVID were Africa and Haiti. And I remember a year and a half after that, they were saying: "Why aren't Haitians dying? How come y'all ain't dying?" Our way of life, the way we consume plants, had a lot to do with that.

CS: I remember at the early stages of COVID, people were like, "*Malanga*, that's it!" [laughter], and I was like: "*Oh, maybe*" [laughter].

MM: If there was a high death toll in Haiti, you would have noticed. I remember when COVID first started, they were calling it a fever. And there was also this

Carine Schermann: **Mafalda Mondestin's Secret Tropical Garden:
Looking at the Island from the Dominican Republic**

thing where people did not want to reveal they had COVID because of superstition, or whatever, and acted as if it would not affect us. But here in the Dominican Republic, a lot of people died.



Mafalda Mondestin, *Untitled*, 2023-24.

Work in progress, Buena Vista, Dominican Republic, Collage on paper, 16 x 24 in.

CS: I was happy to discover your recent work, which I believe is still a work in progress. It seemed to me that leaves and vegetation that used to be more in the background, depending on the pieces, are now taking over, taking more space, almost smothering the protagonists. To me, it's manifesting in different ways: taking more visual space, it's more present, but also, it's acquiring a new materiality. Before you used stencils, and now you're moving towards *du papier découpé* [paper cutting] to give more relief and a sort of third dimension? Could you talk about this progression in your own words, and what it means to you?

MM: What you said was actually spot on. I can think of two pieces where the leaves are taking over the figure. Vegetation can have different meanings. Now, the work is more so referring to life in Haiti: feeling smothered or feeling unable to live freely or to our full potential because of economic reasons, gangs, and violence. But to me, it's still a beautiful place. The people are beautiful. The presence of tropicality could be an ominous character in the work. I use printmaking techniques. I don't know if you're familiar with lino-cut techniques? So, it is linoleum, it's like a dense *caoutchouc* that you carve into. And then you press paper on it to make an impression. Aside from painting, I think carving is one of the oldest mediums for visual arts. Carving on rocks, the Tāino carvings at Sainte-Suzanne⁸ –it's always been done. I don't know, I just love the process. There's something very exciting when you are carving the linoleum. You draw whatever on it. You know what your design is, but you don't know what the work is going to look like until you print it, and each print you make is slightly unique and different from the previous one. There's something very therapeutic and meditative about that whole process. Many of the leaves I use in my collages, I first carve out in linoleum. I print them out in different coloured inks, then I cut them and arrange them on the paper.

I want to make these collages a little bit more dimensional. The leaves are not entirely glued to the paper. Something about flat *collage* bothers me. There is something about leaving them very leaf-like that is interesting to me and adds a little dimension to the work. The people being smothered by the leaves, it's the pressure of being in an environment where you are not able to evolve. It's also the

Carine Schermann: **Mafalda Mondestin's Secret Tropical Garden:
Looking at the Island from the Dominican Republic**

pressure you feel due to migration as well. I am here now. It's a good place to be, but there's a kind of pressure associated with me being here. I guess, unintentionally, I put myself in the work and my own experience. All this work feels very attached to my recent experiences, attached to change and what we talked about earlier. Being a Haitian person here, having so far a great experience, but in the back of my head, I'm guarded and very careful.



Mafalda Mondestin, ***The World Can Be a Scary Place, But It Is Home***, 2018.
Mixed media on canvas, 8 x 10 in.

CS: Yes, I felt the environment was putting the protagonist in danger, but at the same time, it's a space offering them protection?

MM: Yes, it's both! I think that duality started to show up in my work five or six years ago. I think about a small piece called *The World Can Be a Scary Place, But It Is Home*. It's a person's head peeping out and gauging the environment, and also protected by it. So, it can have this double meaning. Usually, I like the work to leave room for people to perceive it in a certain way. So, this one was about pressure, but it can also be very protective, offering a sort of refuge as well.

CS: One of your previous pieces that fascinated me was *Shadows in the Night* (2016) with women gathered in a half circle, in a very communal space. A space meant for dialogue, sorority, relations and so on. I was wondering if the space you represent is created from a concrete place you had in mind, or you've lived in or passed through? And in what ways do you connect with that ideal of community?

MM: I think it does refer to spaces that women tend to create. In the midst of chaos, groups of women offer solace, and those spaces are problem-solving spaces or nurturing spaces. They don't necessarily happen exactly as in the painting. It happens just through relationships with friends and family. It was something I wanted to evoke. Even if it's people who are across the world, on different continents, you do a Skype call, and there is this sense of "if things are not good, you kind of power up and convene." It gives you energy, the boost to continue with your life. I would love to have this space or join a space like that. In certain instances, I have been assigned a leader, but I prefer joining spaces. I would love to have that here as well. And I think it could happen, with time.



Mafalda Mondestin, *Shadows in the Night*, 2016.
Mixed media on paper, 24 x 18 in.

CS: I want to return to what we talked about earlier. Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the same island, even though the food, music, and language are not necessarily the same. Yet, the landscape, the crops, the flowers, the trees and so on, are similar. When I first arrived here two weeks ago, that was something that struck me: this strange familiarity of something that I could almost recognise. Even coming here, the road, the mountains, “this is Haiti” [laughter], but it is not. So, I was just wondering if you felt the same and wanted to talk about this strange sameness?

MM: Thank you for sharing that. This is something I've been wanting to explore, but I'm not sure how to do it in the work because, like I was saying earlier, I wanted to be here because it's close to home and very similar in a way. There will be moments, like you said, where I am looking at the view, or part of the road, or even sometimes there are little houses and I'm like: "oh sa se Ayiti, se yon ti kay andeyo,"⁹ the way the kids run around half-naked. I have flashbacks of Haiti.

CS: Like the plastic chairs, the colmados, even though they are not named "colmado" in Haiti, "ti boutik", it's the same thing.

MM: There is a way of life that is very common, especially if you are talking about the working class, *peyizan*. There are more similarities than some Dominicans want to admit. That brings me a little bit of comfort. Sometimes, I am weirded out, but it encourages me to know more about these people in a very open-minded way, learn more about their history, which I'm doing. I am reading this book called *We Dream Together*.¹⁰

CS: Is it Anne Eller?

MM: Yes, have you read it?

CS: I am reading it right now! [laughter]

MM: I love Haitian history, so I might as well delve in Dominican history, too. It's the same island. Also, I want to know the facts so I can debate with people and be like: "they are telling me BS" [laughter]

CS: I am interested to hear you talk about your protagonists, especially those naked female bodies painted in jet black. What does black mean for you as opposed to colours in your work?

MM: It was an intentional move to simplify the characters. I leave room in the work for ambiguity or interpretation, but also, I did not want the figures to be seen as other than what they are, which is Black women. I chose the colour jet black for those who recognise Blackness and choose to identify as Black. Every hue of Haitian woman is in those women, too, as long as they identify as Haitian or Black. The Haitian constitution says, “*everybody is Black in Haiti,*” though I don't know if all Haitians agree with that. That's why I use India ink, which is made with soot. It's a burnt material that gives you this very dark dust, like *kawoutchou boule*.¹¹ The most burnt parts of those materials are turned into ink. It's a medium I like. It is a bit more natural; it's not acrylic. When you use it, the colour is very beautiful.

CS: I heard you speak on YouTube for the Centre d'Art with Veerle Poupeye and Yolanda Wood. You were referring to those characters as “*des humains simplifies*.”¹² And indeed, they have the bare minimum attributes, as if you wanted to capture their humanness, their being human. Could you talk about the whole aesthetics of these bodies?

MM: Most of them don't have eyebrows. They have no hair because I did not want these specific features to be a distraction, and I did not want them to be sexualised. Sometimes hair sexualises the figure, depending on how you make it. There are different traits assigned to different characters. So, I wanted to leave them in their simplest form. This is a Black woman!

I remember I had an exhibit at the Institut Français, and this young man was really upset. He was like: “*Pourquoi elles sont toutes nues? C'est quoi ça?*” I think it struck him because they were not attractive, they were not sexy, they weren't posing in a way that could attract this male gaze. That's intentional on my part.

CS: I feel that they are powerful because they live confidently in their environment. It's not meant for anybody else but themselves.

MM: I have been asked by men if these women were lesbians. I don't hate men. I just choose to paint women figures. That doesn't mean I don't believe that men don't contribute to society. This is just my work. I have to explain this to people who are upset about the lack of representation of men in my work.

CS: Interesting. And, you do depict male figures! [laughter]

MM: Yes! I did depict male figures, mostly portraits – straightforward portraits of male figures. I just remember that criticism, as if I owe people anything other than what I want to make.

CS: It makes me think of Tessa Mars's work, which is also tied to the feminine persona, also a very evolving figure. I am wondering what are your relationships, friendships, your affinities, and collaborations with other Haitian or Dominican artists here?

MM: A Dominican artist that I really like is Hulda Guzmán,¹³ but I don't know her personally. I think we have people in common. I think she's local.

CS: Yes, she's from Samana.

MM: Most of the Dominican artists I know are from the diaspora. I follow Firelei Baez's work¹⁴, because I like historical work. I don't do that yet, but I would like to eventually try to tie personal family history with Haitian history. I like some of the work she does. Another artist I like is Joiiri Minaya.¹⁵ I don't know her personally, but I think she is based in the US. Her work is interesting – a lot of decolonial work. I would love to get to know her better and be involved in the community. There

was an organization here that was shut down during the pandemic, *Casa Quien*, which seemed very interesting.¹⁶ It was a contemporary site that gave space to artists with whom I would have an affinity– all types of artists who are more political, who are interested in fighting against the status quo, open to queer art. I met a Dominican artist called José Morbán.¹⁷ He lives here. He showed me around a little bit and explained to me that a lot of the spaces are very conservative, they show older artists more. Some galleries don't represent Dominican artists but contemporary artists across America. I'm trying to see spaces that are open to my type of work – Black figuration– in that sense, but I'm learning the landscape. There are few Haitian artists here, like Maksaens Denis.¹⁸ Nonetheless, I'm hoping to find a community here when my Spanish gets better [laughter].

Afterthought:

MM: I just wanted to share this. These thoughts came to my mind as soon as you left, after our interview last fall, and I wish I had expressed them during our conversation because I hate the narrative of Haiti being a lost cause. While acknowledging the very real ongoing issues in Haiti, it is also important to recognise that the scope of the crisis is mainly in the capital. It is still a country of 11 million people living, loving, creating, working, fighting, and doing their best. The crisis is creeping like a cancer and in the years to come might eventually affect the whole country, but I remain hopeful that we will cut it out before it reaches that point. I also remain hopeful that I will return sooner rather than later.

¹ Village in the mountains of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

² At the end 2023, the government of the Dominican Republic decided to close its border with Haiti, as a retaliation measure against Haitian grassroot organizations undertaking the construction of an irrigation canal taking its source from the Massacre River, that forms a natural border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the north of the island. Proof of solidarity and collective effort on the part of the Haitian civil society, the canal has been perceived as an affront by Dominican (ultra)nationalists, and it has fuelled anti-Haitian propaganda.

³ The “poto mitan” is the central pillar in Vodou ceremonies. Considering Haitian women to be the “poto mitan” of society is recognising their role, but at the same time taking it for granted. For criticism of this trope, see Sabine Lamour, Régine Jean-Charles.

⁴ Fifth grade

⁵ “Women know plants”, in Creole.

⁶ Biologist and ethnobotanist who has written extensively on medicinal plants in Haiti. During the pandemic, she worked with the Haitian government to study which plants were being used to fend off COVID.

⁷ French for maroons, who were enslaved people, men and women, who escaped the plantation and lived off the land in the mountainous areas of the island, before, during and after the revolutionary period.

⁸ Commune in the Nord-Est department of Haiti.

⁹ “Oh, that’s Haiti, it’s a little countryside house!”, in Creole.

¹⁰ Eller, Anne. 2016. *We Dream Together: Dominican Independence, Haiti, and the Fight for Caribbean Freedom*. Duke University Press.

¹¹ “Burnt rubber”, in Creole.

¹² “Simplified humans”, in French.

¹³ Dominican artist living on the island. www.hulda.com

¹⁴ New-York based visual artist.

¹⁵ Dominican-American visual artist. www.joiriminaya.com

¹⁶ Casa Quien seems to have restarted some of their activities since this interview.

¹⁷ Dominican visual artist. www.josemorban.com

¹⁸ Haitian visual artist and video artist, based in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. www.maksaens-denis.com